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ABSTRACT

The prospects that current dropout interventions will succeed in reducing dropout behavior are explored using the following sources: (1) the literature on school dropouts; (2) experience in working with policymakers; and (3) a general perspective on the policy process advanced by political scientists. School dropouts are currently the focus of a great deal of public attention as the "issue attention cycle" principle has brought dropouts into ascendancy. More than a fourth of students drop out of school, with the problem nearly doubled in many urban centers. To date, research has done a better job of describing the phenomenon than prescribing solutions. Four common approaches to dropout prevention are the following: (1) early identification; (2) focus on selected individual problems, particularly academic difficulties or negative social relations; (3) focus on connections between school and work; and (4) focus on a broad spectrum of problems facing many adolescents. A best guess for the course of dropout prevention policy for the near future is that efforts will continue along the lines established in the last few years. Although the "issue attention cycle" may cause interest in dropouts to wane, no dramatic changes are expected for better or worse in the next few years. Individual educators who hope to make a difference must carve their own niches soon. There is a 12-item list of references. (SLD)

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Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing

SCHOOL DROPOUTS: HERE TODAY, HERE TOMORROW

CSE Technical Report 296

James S. Catterall

UCLA Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing

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The school dropout has captured the attention of educators, urban leaders, legislators, and the Congress in recent years. That a fourth or more of all high schoolers abandon school with out a diploma seems to have caught the American public once again by surprise. In response, a flurry of activities has swept across the schools. The visibility of the dropout problem and the celebrations accorded attempts to address it have contributed to widespread hopes that dropout rates will show significant declines in the coming years.

Hopes are one thing; prospects are another. Skepticism about the chances of major improvements in our record for school completion is fully justified. For one reason, feverish policy attention to social problems usually wanes long before progress is realized; for another, our schools may be expected to resist the wholesale reordering perhaps prerequisite to true progress on school dropouts.

This article explores the prospects that the current crop of dropout interventions will succeed in reducing dropout behavior. Three sources of insight are drawn into the analysis. One is the considerable literature that has grown around the issue of school dropouts. While not intended to be a comprehensive review of dropout research, the discussion does catalogue the findings most relevant to an analysis of policy prospects. In the process, the reader is directed to several recent works that provide gateways to accumulated scholarship. A second source of insight is the author's experience over the past six years in working with policymakers at the district, state, and national levels to understand and rectify conditions under which youngsters give-up on school. Finally, and a source to which we turn first, a more general perspective on the policy process advanced by political scientists is used to suggest a map for the likely course of policy attention to school dropouts.

The Issue Attention Cycle and School Dropouts

Political scientists recognize a principle of public attention to social problems that bears a timely message for anyone concerned about school dropouts. The principle is called the *Issue Attention Cycle* (Downs, 1972). The cycle describes a pattern of policy attention to large-scale social problems in which the imagination and energy of public leaders progresses from optimism to pessimism and from action to retreat with seemingly assured regularity. The stages of the cycle are these: alarmed discovery of a problem, a search for solutions, euphoric mobilization of resources, institutionalization of responses, the realizations that answers will be expensive and that progress will be slow, and finally a hasty retreat and a shift of attention to the next hot issue fueled by yet another alarmed discovery. A host of education-related campaigns, such as the Johnson administration's War on Poverty, school finance reform during the 1970s, and (in all probability) the present "excellence" movement, exhibit stark conformity to this pattern. That the cycle usually takes but a very few years to run its course suggests that if any progress is to made on an issue, sooner is vastly preferred to later.

The prospects for doing something about school dropouts are presently basking in the early, hopeful stages of the issue attention cycle. The problem experienced an alarmed rediscovery in the early 1980s. States and school districts have been engaged in intensive searches for solutions and experimentation in the years since. Optimism is evident, at least in the rhetoric with which programs are being launched, and no one has yet publicly conceded defeat. So first, this discussion attends to the alarmed attention currently being focused on school dropouts and provides an overview of the numerous attempts that have been mounted to combat early school leaving. We then turn to some lessons emerging from these early efforts, lessons that might inform us on whether our record on school completion is likely to improve much in the years ahead.

Alarmed Discovery

School dropouts have become the object of focused national attention. Current concerns about school dropouts are fueled by several coincident factors: the apparent extent of dropping out, the problems of the dropout in the present era of increased academic standards in American schools, the sketchiness of available data, the continued disadvantages of particular pupil groups shown in dropout data, and skepticism regarding the quality of the American labor force and the nation's competitive position in the world economy.

Disturbing Statistics.

Published dropout rates surprise just about everyone and most particularly the citizen who is only passingly familiar with current trends and issues in education. Americans hold deep-seated beliefs in the value of education, and we have come to consider the completion of high school to be the barest minimum preparation for adult life. The numbers shown in the following table are typical of those brought into current discussions of school dropouts and they are usually interpreted as evidence of a profound educational shortfall in the United States:

Table 1

COMMONLY REPORTED DROPOUT STATISTICS

National 9th Grade Attrition Rate, 1984:			29	%
Highest state attrition rates:			40	%
Typical Dropout Rates	>	Urban school districts:	40-45	%
	>	Problem urban schools:	55-70	%
	>	Problem counties:	48	%

(Readers should note that definitions of dropout rate and calculation procedures vary from place to place. See discussion below.)

We frequently hear that more than a fourth of our kids drop out of school and that this problem is nearly doubled in many urban centers. Dropout rates from individual urban schools run as high as 70%. Several of our states have high school attrition rates of 40%. These statistics seem to alarm anyone who regards high school as a universal part of growing up in America.

The Standards-Raising Movement

Available evidence, although sketchy, suggests that youth have dropped out at today's rates for the past two decades, and that this plateau was preceded by steady increases in school completion since the turn of the century. So the current alarm does not seem a response to an aggravated condition. It seems rather a view of dropout behavior recast by a new context—particularly a nation focused on legislating academic orientations for its elementary and secondary schools. The efforts of many state school systems and local districts to increase requirements for high school diplomas—such as added courses, more classes in academic subjects, and more rigorous course content—have raised concerns over the ability of many youngsters to clear these new hurdles. This question alone seems to have generated considerable interest in gathering and

analyzing school dropout statistics. It has clearly propelled dropout data to the nation's headlines.

Unsatisfactory Data

The scramble for information on dropouts has yielded a unanimous verdict that we do not do a very good job of collecting and reporting dropout statistics. There are a lot of reasons for this, including: the high geographical mobility of students and their families; the understandable unwillingness of schools to incur the high costs of tracking students once they leave school; the numerous definitional issues that are resolved individually and idiosyncratically by states and school districts (e.g., attrition rates based on 9th or 10th grade enrollments versus ultimate diploma counts, or dropout rates based on various ways of classifying individual pupils as dropouts); the fuzziness and intermittent nature of Census Bureau data on the topic; and so on (see Hammack, 1986). What available statistics do suggest, rightly given their total mass and general agreement, is that dropping out affects sizeable numbers and shares of our youth. We are also left with a concern that any results of efforts to do something about early school leaving may go undetected by existing and faulty data collection mechanisms.

Unfair Disadvantages

Interacting with current academic reforms and the related concerns over dropping out is the reinforcement of a long-held disappointment in American schooling provided by dropout statistics. Interests in equalizing educational opportunity have underwritten many efforts to extend extra resources and educational attention to America's poor and ethnic minorities. Continuing studies of school dropouts remind us that we have not made overwhelming progress on these fronts. The incidence of dropping out is consistently found to relate inversely to student socioeconomic background. We also know that dropout rates of American blacks are often shown to be double those of whites, and that dropout rates of Hispanics are frequently higher than those of blacks. Various champions of the interests of disadvantaged children are seizing dropout statistics nowadays to bolster their claims for a larger slice of the educational pie.

American Competitiveness

A final circumstance that brings dropout issues to national prominence is the growing concern over the quality of the American labor force and the ability of American businesses to compete successfully with foreign companies both at home and abroad. One widely claimed educational implication is the need to cultivate technological expertise—an issue addressed in the general standards-raising movement where science and mathematics hold a revered position. Another is the employability and productivity of the citizenry more generally—are youngsters leaving school with sufficient fundamental skills and trainability to meet the needs of American business? Here the basic preparation of the school dropout is called into question, and many fear that too many dropouts bring too little to the American workplace. Dropouts are described as either unemployable because of basic skill or attitude deficits, or as too costly for employers to train if hired, since their learning skills are underdeveloped.

Mobilization of Resources

The dropout alarm has thus sounded and it continues to knell. The issue has progressed at the present time to the second stage of the attention cycle—the search for solutions and the mobilization of resources. These endeavors have taken the form of added research and analysis, numerous public task forces established to assemble information and debate strategies, legislative adoption of pilot and demonstration programs, major foundation support for analyses and program trials, and regional and

nationwide attempts to build networks for the exchange of information. We turn here to what we seem to be learning from these activities.

Lessons from Research

Research has done a better job of describing the dropout phenomenon—who drops out, when, with what stated reasons, with what immediate and long-term consequences—than it has of prescribing either a concrete program or conditional sets of activities that educators or citizens can enlist to combat the problem. Many prescriptions for policy have been grounded on what research concludes about dropouts, but for many reasons—including the complexity of the problem—prescriptions do not unambiguously follow from research findings. Research has tied school completion and dropping out rather firmly to pupil family background, academic ability and performance, social integration with the life of the school, and certain early transitions to adult roles, particularly work and childbearing. Research has also identified substantial economic and social consequences of dropping out, both for the individual and society.

Family Background

The association of dropping out with family socioeconomic background parallels the well documented importance of family background for educational achievement and attainment more generally. Large scale, longitudinal studies have provided the best information on this question (and for many dropout-related questions). Data from the Project Talent study in the early 1960s showed that more than half of both male and female dropouts came from families in the bottom socioeconomic quartile (Bachman, Green, & Wirtanen, 1971). In the recent High School and Beyond survey, dropout rates between the sophomore and senior years only were more than 25 percent for low SES youngsters, about 13 percent for those in the middle of the range, and less than 8 percent for high SES youngsters (Eckstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986).

Finer examinations of home environments have been conducted by some researchers, with results that are more important for dropout prevention than acknowledgements of general associations with socioeconomic status. High School and Beyond analyses suggest that reported parent practices in support of education, such as providing an environment suited to studying, active monitoring of children's activities, and devoting time to children for discussing their experiences, are associated with lower incidence of dropping out of school (Eckstrom et al., 1986). This important research helps to explain differences of achievement and dropout within groups of similar social class, and suggests certain prescriptions for families concerned about the educational fortunes of their children.

Higher dropout rates are also commonly reported for black and Hispanic youth. But detailed analyses of at least two of the national surveys have reached an interesting refinement of this well known conclusion. When family economic status is controlled, the dropout rates of blacks and Hispanics tend to differ little from those of whites (Rumberger, 1983). In High School and Beyond, black and Hispanic dropout rates were even lower than those of whites once family income was controlled (Eckstrom et al., 1986).

An important conclusion seems to be that although family background is an overriding measured factor in achievement and attainment studies, it is specific family practices that may underlie the relationship between family background and dropping out. The latter may be amenable to intervention and change; the former generally is not.

Academic Ability and Performance

Dropping out is unquestionably more likely for those who show lower academic ability on standardized tests and who achieve lower grades in school. About half of those reporting D averages or lower typically dropout, a fraction that diminishes steadily with increasing grade performance. The chances of dropping out are also substantially higher for those who are held back in an early grade. Low academic performance has shown up as the most significant predictor of school dropout in studies that have compared academic with other factors in controlled designs. But the fact that (as in High School and Beyond) nearly one tenth of those sophomores with B averages and almost 3 percent of those who report earning mostly A's drop out reminds us that dropping out is not strictly an academic phenomenon.

Social Integration

Dissatisfaction, negative attitudes, and anti-social behavior are common among those who subsequently drop out. Eventual dropouts tend to be absent and truant from school more frequently, more entangled in school disciplinary proceedings, more frequently suspended, and in more trouble with the law. They express less interest in school, feel they are held in less esteem than others, and feel less positively about themselves. They also report that their friends are less participating, less interested, less successful, and less inclined toward college. Low participation in extracurricular activities is also reported by those who eventually drop out (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986a).

Given what we know about the academic deficits of eventual dropouts as a group, it is not surprising that negative attitudes about school prevail. Unfortunately, we lack analyses that help us to sort adequately among an important set of questions: does the apparent lack of social integration of the eventual dropout result from low academic success, does poor school work lead to social disaffection, do academic and social deficits fuel each other, and what independently contributes to each? And finally, are these processes different for different youngsters and in different circumstances?

Early Adult Transitions

Finding and pursuing work and forming their own families are adult roles adopted by many youngsters while still in school. We know from High School and Beyond survey data that nearly half of those in high school work at a job, with slightly higher fractions of eventual dropouts than eventual finishers engaging in paid work. Research has also documented the increased propensity to drop out for those who work excessive hours, beyond 15 or 20 hours per week (Steinberg, Greenberger, Garduque, & McAuliffe, 1982). Our knowledge of underlying processes involved has gaps similar to those revealed for general social integration. We do not know if work outside of school is a response to disaffection with school or if schoolwork suffers as a result of excessive work involvement. A good guess is that both occur.

Child-bearing and early marriage are implicated in some dropping out, by the self-reports of dropouts in national surveys. More than 40 percent of black female dropouts cited pregnancy as a reason for leaving school in the Survey of Youth and Labor Market experience (Rumberger, 1983). Fifteen percent of Hispanics and 14 percent of white females cite this reason. Between 20 and 30 percent of High School and Beyond female dropouts cited pregnancy as a reason for leaving school. Marriage plans are claimed by 5 to 10 percent of males and 15 to 36 percent of females (Eckstrom et al., 1986). As in the case of early work choices, we do not know much about the temporal or causal ordering of dropout intentions and pregnancy or marriage plans.

Consequences of Dropping Out

Several studies have documented the costs to individuals and society associated with undereducation and dropping out. Dropouts work at lower paying jobs, are more frequently unemployed, and are more likely to need various public services such as welfare and health. Dropouts are also disproportionately involved with crime and its associated costs. Both the individual and society appear to lose, and strong arguments for public attention to dropouts emerge in cost analyses (Catterall, 1987a).

Implications for Dropout Prevention

As implied above,research on school dropouts provides some basic underpinnings of thought and action on dropout prevention, but scholarly works have not led to precise program prescriptions. Most analyses have focused on student attributes, behaviors, and attitudes, and not on what schools, parents, and significant others in the lives of adolescents do that tends to either ameliorate or aggravate conditions associated with leaving school. And specific program evaluation efforts are few and far between when it come to dropout prevention and recovery.

Taking a prominent place in dropout policy debates nowadays, instead of what could be called systematic appraisals, is a small explosion of information on model or exemplary dropout efforts. A close examination of these materials reveals, not surprisingly, very little documentation of results; few program descriptions include even simple descriptions showing dropout rates of participants in comparison to those of reasonable control groups; few show before and after measures on individual attitude, self-perception, and learning variables. This state of affairs does not mean necessarily that these programs are not working—it may reflect chiefly the difficulty and expense of mounting these types of evaluations.

We can state with confidence some general observations as we survey the current state of dropout prevention (see Orr, 1987):

1. Different programs are aimed at specific target populations of would-be or actual dropouts.

2. Several core approaches to the problem exist, on or more of which is found in most dropout prevention activities.

3. The selection of an appropriate intervention should be based on the problems or barriers evidenced by the intended beneficiaries, i.e. on the conditions facing a particular target group.

4. A number of programs have gained widespread attention, sometimes on the basis of promising initial results, but more often in response to the enthusiasm of their sponsors and participants, or because of their novel collaborative support arrangements.

Core Approaches

There are four dominant approaches evident in the actions of schools to combat school leaving, and each of these has basic origins in the dropout research that was sketched above. The four common approaches to action on dropouts are these:

1. Early identification and help for potential dropouts,

2. focus on selected individual problems, particularly accumulated academic deficits or negative social relations,

3. focus on the connections between school and work, and

4. focus on a broad spectrum of problems facing many adolescents.

Target populations

In addition to displaying some common strategies, dropout prevention programs often identify one or more of the following groups as needing assistance:

1. The student in academic or social difficulty who still shows an interest in school—frequently the late elementary or junior high schooler,

2. The student who is showing distinct signs of alienation and leaving school through extensive absence or truancy,

3. The student with a specific impediment to school continuation, such as having a child or needing to work to support a family,

4. The student who has already dropped out.

We turn now to what we are learning about each of these core strategies and target populations—who do these strategies seem to reach and what issues face the sponsors such prevention efforts?

Early Identification

Mann (1986) calls them red flags. Some pilot programs call them early warning signals. By any name, a long list of pupil characteristics and behaviors associated with increased odds of dropping out can be culled from accumulated research. The eighth grader who has been held back in an early grade, has a D average or worse, reads two or more years behind grade level, is absent frequently, has been suspended, is working 20 hours per week, and who oogles at passing infants has an overwhelming collection of strikes against his chances of finishing school. He or she will probably not even show up for ninth grade.

Early identification of the potential dropout is an enticing prospect for educators—it is decidedly important in reaching the early struggler before thoughts of leaving school begin to form. High school teachers and counselors frequently lament the difficulties of treating the dropout-prone once they show signs of disaffection and leaving. Many of the developmental deficiencies of typical dropouts described in the research have their roots in much earlier academic or social difficulties. Early identification and remediation are natural responses.

But early identification is not without its hazards. Studies amassing early behavior and performance data reveal the imprecision of predicting just who will and who will not eventually drop out. The red flags result from central tendencies for which there are numerous exceptions. The obvious and problematic danger is that students who are no such thing will be labeled and treated as potential dropouts, and particularly that they will be confronted with low expectations for school performance.

Clearly the "high school is too late, early signals too uncertain" problem is a crucial one for dropout prevention policy development. Doing more for low achievers at an earlier time in their school careers is a fundamental challenge to educators and successes would undoubtedly improve school retention rates, from all we know about dropping out generally. Just when and whether to call someone a potential dropout raise a separate set of questions. Here is where the counselor or teacher in less formal

interactions with students can probably be of most assistance. Some students express doubts about the prospects of their finishing school when asked, and such doubts could become known to counselors or mentors who show some caring. Then a set of activities could legitimately be carried out in the name of dropout prevention, with a communicated expectation between mentor and student—that of staying in school.

Academics Focus

No single problem or cause can be tied to dropping out of school, but a suggestion of our cumulative experience and research is that there are some fairly predominant ones. Researchers and educators alike would probably agree that the largest proximate cause of dropping out is academic difficulty. If one were allowed a single piece of information about a 9th grader and wanted to predict dropping out, he could do no better than to know the student's grades. Academics are at the core of the school, at least in theory, and those who do poorly are made to feel it in a variety of ways that can make school an unpleasant place to be—such as the in-class embarrassments of not knowing answers or failing tests or reading poorly aloud.

Because of the central importance of academics among the goals of the school, and because of its centrality in the problems of many dropouts, numerous dropout prevention efforts focus on academic training. Reinforcing the place of academics in the traditional dropout arsenal, research has suggested that non-academic focused programs, such as work-related interventions, contribute little to actual school completion unless they build-in attention to needed education success skills (see Catterall, 1987b). And if academic standards are indeed raised for all students as a result of recent education reforms, the need for academic interventions is certain to expand.

Counseling Focus

Recognizing the importance of academics and creating change for kids in academic trouble are two different things. To many observing educators, a variety of pressing problems interfere with the adolescent's capacity for academic achievement and simply must be treated simultaneously if not first. The evident lack of social integration of many eventual dropouts—disciplinary entanglements, strained relationships with teachers and peers, apparent low regard for themselves as individuals and for the value of education, low academic aspirations, and unformulated goals for adult life are all seen as critical stumbling blocks. Counseling interventions sometimes take a primary place in the dropout prevention arsenal because of the primacy these problems can have in the life of the adolescent.

Schooling and Work Focus

We know that many high school students work at part-time jobs, dropouts and finishers alike. One answer to student disaffection with school has been to emphasize the work-relatedness of school by connecting the two through vocation-oriented curricula. There is a wide range of ways in which this is achieved, from traditional vocational classes, integrated specialized vocational training sequences, school-based enterprises, to work-study arrangements with off-campus employers. Gary Wehlage (1983) describes several promising Wisconsin programs for the marginal high school student, all of which feature work experiences. And a number of recently started dropout prevention efforts involve creative partnerships between local businesses and the schools (Orr, 1987).

Broad Spectrum Programs

Some programs recognize explicitly the complex nature of the dropout decision for the individual teenager. These programs address the whole child—academic skill building, desires to connect academics to something tangible like a job, self-esteem

shortfalls, problems generated at home such as neglect or abuse, problems with illegal drugs and alcohol. These programs tend to combine vocational with academic curricula and have a strong counseling component with one-on-one adult-student attention. In short, they provide elements of all of the program foci described above.

A model broad spectrum dropout prevention program has been developed by educators at the Center for Effective Secondary Schools at the University of Wisconsin (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986b). Preliminary results obtained over the past three years at 9 different school sites adopting the model program are very encouraging. At-risk students seem to stay in school, and to show gains on some important attitude and self-perceptions, such as self-esteem, social bonding to peers and teachers, and perceived opportunity in life. Along with the model program, the Center and collaborating researchers (this author among them) are refining instruments to be used in evaluating the effects of dropout prevention programs. These instruments and reports based on their use are available to interested programs, either through the Center or the author's office.

Whither Attention To Dropouts?

The discussion has concentrated thus far on the ascendence of the school dropout issue in the United States over the past five years and the enthusiastic mobilization of information and resources around it. We also described an "issue attention cycle" that might be expected to apply to this current press for intervening on behalf of school dropouts. The more mature stages of this cycle are not promising—they suggest the probable emergence of disenchantment with the prospects for achieving results and a reconsideration of the costs of substantial progress.

The attention cycle for school dropouts may be pushing up against these limits. One point in evidence is that no school district or state, to our knowledge, has reported a dramatic reduction in its dropout rate since the current press began a few years ago. Therefore, whatever is being spent or mustered on dropout programs may be perceived as not up to the task of systematic improvement. We might also note that the efforts of large school systems to combat dropping out—all fanfare aside—typically amount to small shares of regular school operations. The million dollar initiative, typical of celebrated programs, would account for less than a fraction of a percent of one of our large city school district budgets. If budgets for the full array of urban district programs targeted to the school leaving problem could be identified, we would not expect them to be anywhere near commensurate to the problem that will affect perhaps half of their enrollments. Dropout prevention simply may not be on the real agendas of our schools.

While we may have reasons for pessimism on the chances of systematic improvement in our record for school completion, we do not yet see signs of retreat from the issue. Business leaders continue to call for better training for youngsters likely to enter the workforce directly from high school. Conferences and task forces on at-risk youth proceed at a lively pace. The rhetoric of school leaders and legislators continues to feature the dropout as a central contemporary issue. And a newly installed Hispanic Secretary of Education has pointed to the dropout issue as paramount in our secondary schools (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 5, 1988, p. 1).

Maintenance of pressure to reduce dropping out may also derive from the extended course of the academic excellence movement. Observers have marvelled at the sustained nature of this latter reform campaign, also in the face of its own anticipated attention cycle. Since we noted that raising standards in our high schools has had the effect of creating concerns for the potential dropout, the dropout issue may be expected to continue to ride on the coat-tails of the push for excellence.

A best guess for the course of dropout prevention policy over the next year or

two thus becomes a continuation of what we have seen in the last few years. The dominant quality of these recent years has been diversity—diverse program structures addressing a diverse range of student needs with diverse patterns of sponsorship in the schools and their surrounding communities. We also described these programs as small in scale-small because this may be the best format for reaching dropout-prone pupils and small because no-one has supported what could be called massive efforts.

Entrepreneurship as a Key Ingredient

At this point in time, we would argue that the future of dropout prevention is not in the hands of the Congress, state legislatures, or local boards of education, even though these agencies have the statutory authority to allocate resources to goals of their choosing. Because these bodies have demonstrated their satisfaction with vigorous lip service and small budgets for dropouts, the most crucial ingredient will remain the local entrepreneur. The only common ingredient that stands out in available information regarding successful or promising dropout programs is the presence of a caring individual or group of sponsors at the center of things—a teacher, school counselor, principal, or business leader. Addressing the problems of dropouts is probably like almost any endeavor in the schools—if someone cares enough, things can and will happen. The power of entrepreneurship cannot be overestimated.

Given the scale of current activities—numerous but spread thin across and within systems—the results of the small and individual efforts described above are not likely to change dropping out very much. If a fourth now leave without graduating, this fraction will be about the same in 1995. If New York loses half its pupils to the streets today, it will continue to lose half tomorrow.

Dramatic Change?

If systematic change in dropout behavior is to be effected through public policies, two sorts of directions bear some promise independent of questions of the likelihood of their sponsorship. One is for policy authorities to facilitate the activities of dropout entrepreneurs at local school sites. As we have learned regarding the implementation of various reform and improvement programs, change is more likely when local program-building is a part of the strategy and when solutions are not mandated by a central, higher authority. If decisionmakers wish to place dropout prevention on their school agenda, they should recognize that strategies are best determined where specific problems are known, where available resources can be identified, and where the conveyors of assistance will benefit from a sense of program ownership. Sensible central policies for dropout prevention and recovery—issuing from large district offices or state legislatures—must recognize that entrepreneurship cannot be legislated, it must be facilitated. A wise prescription appears to be that central authorities should provide substantive resources, technical assistance, and information to dropout entrepreneurs.

The other plausible direction for improvements in school graduation rates is one that neither school officials nor the American public cares to consider or discuss seriously. This direction stems from observations that the evolution of the American high school may have reached its limit some twenty years ago in the degree to which the institution can appeal to and retain youngsters through graduation. A 75 percent national completion rate has been roughly stable since 1970, after undergoing steady increases since the turn of the century. This suggests that our conception of secondary education with its common and academic definition of success may inevitably leave a sizeable core of adolescents turned-off. What is indicated then would be an effort to see that multiple forms of success for students were available and rewarded. Students for whom academics were a bust could specialize in a vocational skill, performing arts concentrations would appeal to some, the care of young children to others.

Of course, we do this to a small degree already, through the provision of magnet programs, alternative schools, and vocational education. But any of these that are known to de-emphasize academics seem to bear stigmas and thus become places of last resort in the high school. And early 1970s efforts to make the high school curriculum more "relevant," a systematic effort to change the terms of success in school, are cited by many as a prime motivator of today's academic renaissance. As a society, we seem to be saying that making it through an academic high school program is what really matters, and anything else is cheating—cheating the individual and cheating society. It seems unlikely then that a wholesale shift of the terms of graduation is likely to occur, at least for the foreseeable future and surely not as long as the excellence movement retains its grasp on our educational imagination.

This returns the discussion to its conclusion-that dropping out of school is a visible current problem creating a storm of prevention and recovery activities around a core school structure that has not bent much in the direction of the underachiever or the disaffected. According to recent experiences with policy attention to other pressing education issues, even the present pace of dropout programs is not likely to be maintained for more than a few years. Individual educators who wish to make a difference will find that they must carve-out niches for themselves in their schools and districts in order to do so—and soon. And a sensible, non-revolutionary strategy for policymakers is to do what they can to facilitate the activities of these individuals. Finally, experience suggests that the dropout issue will rise once again to cries of alarm, probably in the early years of the 21st century.

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